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Encounter with the Void

THE MORE WE PONDER Buddha's last exhortation: "Death is inherent in all compound things. Work relentlessly for your salvation"—the more we are disturbed by the impossibility of *feeling* ourselves an aggregate, a transitory, if not fortuitous combination of elements. We can conceive ourselves thus easily enough in the abstract; but concretely we experience physical revulsion, as if gagging on some indigestible evidence. Until such time as we have conquered this organic reaction, we shall continue to suffer that bane, essentially a jinx, which is the appetite for existence.

We unmask things and stigmatize them with the name of appearances, but to no purpose, for we admit automatically that they conceal being. We will cling to anything sooner than tear ourselves free from this fascination which lies at the source of our acts and very nature, from this primordial effulgence which blinds us to the non-reality inherent in all things.

I am a "being" metaphorically; if I were one in fact, I should remain one forever, and death, devoid of meaning, would cease to hold sway over me. "Work relentlessly for your salvation"—in other words, do not forget that you are a fugitive assemblage, a compound merely waiting to come undone. Indeed, salvation would have no meaning unless we were provisional, to an absurd degree; if there existed in us the slightest factor of duration, we would long ago have been saved or doomed, in either case exempt from questing, from horizons. If deliverance matters, then our unreality is an authentic boon.

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We should strip being of all its attributes and no longer regard it as a crutch, as the *locus* of all our attachments, the eternal, reassuring dead-end, the most firmly rooted of our prejudices, the one most successfully bred into us. We are accomplices of being, or what we assume to be such, for there is no being, only imitations of it. Even if there were, we should nonetheless have to disengage ourselves from it, extirpate it, considering that whatever

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is evolves into a force of subjection, and an impediment. Let us confer on others the status of shadows; in so doing, we shall separate ourselves from them the more easily. If we are mad enough to believe that they actually *exist,* we lay ourselves open to unspeakable disappointments. Let us be cautious enough to recognize that whatever befalls us, every event, every relationship, is inessential, and that if knowledge exists, its purpose should be to disclose the advantage of moving among ghosts.

Thought, too, is a prejudice and an impediment. It liberates only at the outset, when it enables us to sever certain bonds; afterward, it can only absorb our energy and paralyze our impulses to go free. The happiness one experiences in suspending it offers sufficient proof that it can be of no help whatever. Just like desire, to which it bears a family resemblance, it feeds on its own substance and takes pleasure in asserting itself, multiplying itself; it can occasionally lean toward the truth, but sheer fussing is its typical employment: we think out of liking for thought, as we desire out of liking for desire. Both are a fever in the midst of fictions, an over-exertion inside non-knowing. He who *knows* has risen above the fables perpetrated by desire and thought, he emerges from the current, he no longer acquiesces in sham. Thinking partakes of the bottomless illusion which alike breeds and devours itself, anxious to perpetuate and to consume itself; thinking is a competitor of delirium. In so much fever, only our pauses make any sense, the moments in which we halt to catch our breath: the experience of the void—which is tantamount to the sum of these pauses, these intervals—implies the temporary suppression of desire, for it is desire that plunges us into non-knowing, misleads us, and goads us to project being into everything round about.

The void enables us to lay waste the idea of being without itself falling into the rubble—it thus survives an onslaught which would spell the destruction of any other idea. Actually, it is not an idea at all but the agent which helps us abolish ideas. Every idea represents one more chain: the mind, if it means to achieve withdrawal, must disencumber itself of them, and of beliefs as well. In this we shall succeed only by lifting ourselves above the operations of thought, for so long as thought functions and rages, it camouflages the depths of the void, which come into view directly the fever of mind, of desire, abates.

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Since all our beliefs are intrinsically *shallow,* rooted in appearances, it follows that they exist, indiscriminately, on the same level, in the same measure of unreality. We are so constituted as to live with them, we are compelled to: they form the ingredients of our normal, daily malediction. That is why, when at length we see them for what they are and brush them off, we enter the totally unfamiliar, our mind in an expansive state which makes everything else, by comparison, seem pale, episodic, including this very malediction. Our limits, if any remain, recede. The void—the self without self—amounts to the abolition of that adventure called the "I," it is being without any trace of being, a blessed engulfment, an incomparable disaster.

(The danger lies in making the void a substitute for being, thereby diverting it from its crucial function, which is to sabotage the mechanism of attachment. But if it, too, becomes an object of attachment, then would it not have been better to remain satisfied with being and its retinue of illusions? To undo our bonds, we must, in future, refrain from adhering to anything whatever, anything but the *nothing* of freedom.)

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Ideally, we would be able to lose, without regrets, all taste for beings and things, each day honoring some creature or object by renouncing it; thus making the rounds of appearances and dismissing each in turn, we would achieve a state of unremitting withdrawal, which is the very secret of joy. Whatever we appropriate, knowledge even more than material acquisitions, only fuels our anxiety; on the other hand, what serenity we enjoy, what radiance once we have abandoned the frantic quest for goods, *including spiritual ones!* Saying "me" is grave enough, but it is a still graver thing to say "mine," for that presupposes a more benighted view, a tightening of the screws that fasten us to the world. The idea that one owns nothing, that one *is* nothing consoles, but the supreme consolation resides in the victory over this very idea.

So stubbornly does anxiety cleave to being, that it must tear itself away if it cherishes hopes of self-conquest. Does it aspire to repose in God? It succeeds only in so far as He stands above being or at least compasses a zone in which being dwindles, rarefies: there, having no footholds, anxiety sets itself free and gravitates

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toward those confines where God, liquidating his last traces of being, surrenders to the temptation of the void.

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As the Orient has always known, the wise man refuses to make plans, he never *projects*. So you pretend to be a sage of sorts. . . . The fact is, you form projects but balk at executing them. The more you weigh them, the more—having finally renounced them—you experience a sensation of well-being which can swell into ecstasy.

The consequence of non-knowing is that everyone lives in and by projects; this metaphysical obnubilation looms as large as the species. For the enlightened man, becoming and, even more, its constituent acts, are merely a decoy, a hoax generating disgust or fright.

What counts is not producing but understanding. And to understand means to observe the degree of lucidity a being has attained, his capacity for perceiving the sum of unreality inherent in any given phenomenon.

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Let us hold fast to the concrete and the void, let us proscribe whatever stands between the two: "culture," "civilization," "progress," let us ruminate on the best formula ever conceived here-below: manual work in a monastery. . . . No truth except in physical exertion and in contemplation; the rest is accidental, futile, unhealthy. Health consists in exercise and in vacuity, in the muscles and in meditation; under no circumstances in thought. To meditate is to become absorbed in an idea and to lose oneself in it, whereas to think is to leap from one idea to another, to delight in quantity, to hoard trifles, to stalk concept after concept, goal after goal. Meditating and thinking are separate, indeed incompatible, activities.

Isn't making a rule of the void also a form of pursuit? No doubt, but it involves pursuing the absence of pursuit, aiming at a target which immediately eclipses every other. We live in anxiety because no goal could satisfy us, because, above all our desires, above being as such, there hovers a fatality which necessarily impinges on these accidents we call individuals. Nothing that actualizes itself escapes disgrace. The void—a bound outside this

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fatality—is, like every product of quietism, essentially anti-tragic. Through its mediation, we would learn to rediscover ourselves in backtracking to our origins, to our eternal potentiality. Doesn't it put an end to our desires? But of what account are these desires, taken as a whole, next to a momentary reprieve from them? Happiness does not consist in desire but in its absence or, to be more precise, in our enthusiasm for this absence—when we want to tumble, plunge, disappear, *shout*. . . .

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When the void itself seems too ponderous or impure, we run helter-skelter towards a nudity beyond any conceivable form of space, while the last instant of time coalesces with the first, and disappears in it.

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Let us relieve awareness of everything it contains, of all the universes it drags in tow, let us purge it along with perception, let us restrict ourselves to white, forgetting all colors but the one that denies them. What peace prevails immediately one has annulled diversity, immediately one escapes the calvary of nuance and is swallowed up in the *Unvariegated*! Awareness as pure form, then the very absence of awareness.

To evade the intolerable, let us resort to distraction, to flight, let us seek a region in which no sensation deigns to assume a name, and no appetite to incarnate itself, let us win back the primordial repose, let us abolish, along with the past, odious memory but especially awareness, our immemorial enemy whose mission it is to leave us destitute, to wear us down. The Unconscious, on the contrary, is nourishing, it fortifies, it restores us our beginnings, our original cohesion and plunges us again into the beneficent chaos which reigned before the *wound* of individuation.

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Nothing matters: a major discovery if ever there was one, which people have never succeeded in turning to good account. Only the void, whose motto it is, can give an exalting twist to this reputedly depressing conclusion, only the void endeavors to convert the negative into the affirmative, the irreparable into the possible. There is no *self*, this we know, but our knowledge is

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riddled with afterthoughts. Happily, the void is there to stand in for the self when it vanishes, it stands in for everything, it answers our expectations, it assures us of our non-reality. The void is the abyss without vertigo.

Instinctively we tend toward the self; everything in us demands it: it satisfies our requirements of continuity, solidity. Flying in the face of evidence, it confers upon us an atemporal dimension: there is nothing more normal than our clinging to it, even when we question its existence and expose its fraudulence, for the self is the *reflex* of every living creature. . . . Nevertheless, it appears to us inconceivable directly we view it coldly: it fritters away, it vanishes, it is nothing but the symbol of a fiction.

Our first impulse carries us toward the intoxication of identity, toward the dream of indistinction, toward the *atman* which answers our deepest, our most secret appeals. Once sober, we instantly recoil, we abandon the *putative* foundation of our being in favor of the fundamental destructibility; our knowledge and experience of the latter, our disciplined obsession with it, conducts us to nirvana, to *plenitude* in the void.

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Because it offers us the illusion of permanence, because it makes promises it cannot keep, the idea of the absolute is suspect, if not pernicious. Infected through and through, in no way made to last, perishable to our very core, we need therapy, not consolation. The absolute does not solve our quandaries, nor does it put an end to our ailments: it is merely an expedient and a tranquilizer. The doctrine that advocates it holds true only so long as it restricts itself to analysis and denounces appearances; no sooner does it pit some ultimate reality against them, than it inspires doubt. When one quits the domain of the illusory and endeavors to replace it with the indestructible, one slithers into falsehood. If one confronts the void more straightforwardly, that is because one does not pursue it for its own sake, for the truth it is reputed to contain, but for its therapeutic virtues; it is converted into a cure, one fancies that it will adjust the mind's oldest warp, namely, the supposition that something exists. . . .

Shaken animal that he is, man has graduated beyond the stage of satisfying himself with "hopes"; he is waiting not for one more placebo but for deliverance. Who will bring it? On this

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score, the only one of significance, Christianity proved less helpful than Buddhism, and western speculation less effective than eastern. Why waste our time over abstractors deaf to our cries or saviours spoiling to salt our wounds? And what can we expect from that segment of the world which sees in the contemplative man an abulic and in the lucid man an *écorché*?

We need a redemptive shock. It is incredible that Aquinas could view stupor as an "obstacle to philosophical meditation" when it is precisely when "stupefied" that one begins to *understand,* that is, to perceive the inanity of all "truths." Stupor bewilders us the better to awaken us: it lays us open, it delivers us to the essential. A full-blown metaphysical experience is nothing but uninterrupted stupor, triumphant stupor.

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To be incapable of baring oneself to the purifying void, the appeasing void, is a sign of indigence. We are so deeply mired in our philosophies as to have evolved nothing better than a sordid version of the void: nothingness. Into it we have projected our uncertainties, all our ills and terrors, for what is nothingness, ultimately, but an abstract complement of hell, the performance of outcasts, the last-ditch effort at lucidity mustered by creatures unequipped for deliverance? Too corroded by our impurities to serve us as a springboard toward some virgin concept, the void for example (which does not bear the onus of hell, which is not contaminated by it), nothingness is merely a barren extremity, a wrong way out, faintly sepulchral, akin to those efforts at renunciation which turn sour for being exposed to nostalgia.

The void is nothingness stripped of its negative attributes, nothingness transfigured. Once we have tasted it, our relations with the world are thereby modified, something in us changes; although we remain our fallible selves, we no longer *belong here* in precisely the same way as before. That is why having recourse to the void during temper tantrums can prove salutary; our worst impulses are blunted on contact with it. For lack of it, who knows? we might now be languishing in prison or in some padded cell. Furthermore the lesson in abdication which it offers invites us to deal with our enemies, our slanderers, from a more strategic vantage point. Shall we kill them, or spare them? Which is more damaging, more painful: vengeance or triumph over

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vengeance? Where does one draw the line? In our uncertainty, let us prefer the agony of not avenging ourselves.

That is the ultimate concession one can make, short of being a saint.

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Only he who finds himself oppressed by the universality of anguish is ripe for deliverance. To attempt to set oneself free without being aware of this anguish amounts to impossibility, or vice. There is no such thing as gratuitous deliverance; one must deliver oneself from something, in this case from the nagging ubiquity of the intolerable—which one feels alike in the hypothesis of being and of non-being, since things and their semblances are equally painful. But the hypothesis of vacuity offers, *malgré tout,* one advantage: it brings to light the exaggeration of anguish, the discrepancy between the stature it assumes and the puniness of its cause. One always torments oneself to excess, whether this world be real or not. To be sure, most people do not know the extent of their suffering. It is the privilege of awareness to descry the hideous, to identify the piercing illusion which beings are heir to.

What is true of Christian salvation is also true of deliverance: a certain theologian, with outrageous naïveté, believes in redemption while denying original sin; but if sin is not consubstantial to humanity, what meaning can one ascribe to the advent of the redeemer, what did he come here to redeem? Our corruption, far from being accidental, is permanent, immemorial. And no less so is iniquity: wrongly taxed with being "mysterious," it is a piece of evidence, indeed there exists nothing more *visible* here-below, where setting things aright would require a new saviour for each generation, for each individual rather.

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When one ceases to desire, one straightaway becomes a citizen of all worlds and of none; desire *places* the individual—having transcended it, he is no longer from anywhere and no longer has reason to envy anyone, either the saint or the ghost.

Desire does not absolutely preclude happiness, but beatitude is another matter; it can flower only in the debris of broken relationships. For its sake, the hermit destroys all his ties, and himself.

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Cow urine was the only medicine monks had permission to use in the early Buddhist communities. A most sensible measure. If one covets peace, one will attain it only in rejecting whatever may cause trouble, whatever man has grafted onto his original simplicity, his original health. Nothing speaks of our fall more eloquently than the spectacle of a drugstore: remedies for every ailment but the essential one, which no human nostrum will ever cure.

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If the belief in one's *uniqueness* derives from an illusion, let us agree that that illusion is so global, so imperious, there are grounds for wondering whether we can still call it an illusion. How to withdraw from that which we shall never encounter again, from the scandalous, pitiful nonentity bearing our name? The illusion in question, the source of all the torments we must endure, is so embedded in us, to get rid of it would require a sudden gust carrying off our self, leaving us *alone,* without anyone, without ourselves. . . .

We cannot, alas, nullify our desires; we can only undermine them, compromise them. We are immobilized by the self, the poison of the "I." When we escape it, or imagine we have, then we are entitled to those big words used by mystics, true and false alike. There exists no such thing as total conversion: one converts *with one's own nature.* Even after the Illumination, Buddha was only Siddhartha Gotama, *fortified with knowledge.*

Everything one thinks one has suffocated revives after a while: defects, vices, obsessions. The most patent flaws, presumably "corrected," return disguised, but just as annoying as before. The pains one took to rid oneself of them will not have been completely unavailing. A given desire, long since ejected, reappears, but we *know* that it has, it does not exercise us secretly, nor does it take us unawares—it dominates us, subjugates us, we are still its slaves to be sure, but non-consenting slaves. Every *conscious* sensation is one which we have combatted unsuccessfully, but its victory is a Pyrrhic one for, by winning, it has routed itself from our innermost life.

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On every occasion we have taken the easy path, choosing God or his surrogates, in any case *people,* to have someone to chat or argue with. For contemplation we have substituted tension, thus creating between the divinity and ourselves vexingly personal ties. Only men who seek but do not wish to *find* have managed to become virtuosi of the inner drama. The great modern discovery is *spiritual malaise,* the rupture between substance and vacuity, or to be more precise, the simulacra of each. Whence the cult of singularity in every domain. In literature, an uncommon error is worth more than a truth proven, known, accepted. The anomalous, on the contrary, has no value on the spiritual plane where only the depth of an experience counts.

According to the *Bhagavadgita,* he who is "a prey to doubt," the same doubt Buddhism as well lists among the five obstacles to salvation, is lost to this world and to the next. Doubt is not a deepening but a stagnation, the vertigo of stagnation. In its grip, one cannot make headway and achieve one's purpose; it is a gnawing, nothing more. When you imagine yourself at a safe remove, it suddenly yawns before you, and the cycle of fall and laborious ascent recommences. It must *explode* before the direction to freedom will become apparent. Without such violence, devastating even the most legitimate reasons for doubt, one lingers indefinitely in malaise, one cultivates it, one avoids major decisions, one devours oneself, and takes pleasure in so doing.

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He who sets store by his name and his work, still more he who dreams of a name or a work, the quixotic person in short, is immune to the passion for utter self-effacement. If he persists in seeking salvation, he will at best *bog down* in nirvana. . . .

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One cannot imagine a *bitter* mystic. Knowledge as the world reckons it, clairvoyant dryness, an excess of lucidity lacking interior dimension, bitterness is the attribute of people who, having cheated in their relations with the absolute and with themselves, no longer know to whom and where to turn. It is, for all that,

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more common than one would think, it is normal, quotidinal, everybody's lot. Joy, on the other hand, the fruit of an exceptional hour, seems to spring from some imbalance, a mechanism gone haywire in the most private area of our being, so flagrantly does it contradict the multiple evidence in whose midst we live. Could it possibly come from *elsewhere,* from beyond ourselves? It is dilation, and dilation always partakes of another world, whereas bitterness is contraction, even if the infinite looms in the background. But an infinite that crushes rather than liberates.

No, it is scarcely conceivable that joy should throw one off balance, and even less conceivable that it should come from nowhere; it is so full, so enveloping, so marvelously unbearable, that one would not be able to face it without some supreme reference. In all events, it alone makes it possible to entertain the notion that man could forge gods out of some need for *gratitude.*

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One can readily imagine in what terms a man of today would speak if called upon to make a pronouncement on the only religion ever to have introduced a radical formula of salvation:

"The quest for deliverance can be justified only if one believes in the transmigration, in the endless vagrancy of the self, and if one aspires to halt it. But for us who do not believe in it, what are we to halt? This unique and negligible duration? It is obviously not long enough to deserve the effort an escape would require. For the Buddhist, the prospect of other existences is a nightmare; for us, the nightmare consists in the termination of this one, this nightmare. Give us another one, we would be tempted to clamor, so that our disgraces will not conclude too soon, so that they may, at their leisure, hound us through several lives.

Deliverance answers a necessity only for the person who feels *threatened* by a surfeit of existence, who fears the burden of dying and redying. For us, condemned not to reincarnate ourselves, what's the use of struggling to set ourselves free from a nonentity? to liberate ourselves from a terror whose end lies in view? Furthermore, what's the use of pursuing a supreme unreality when everything here-below is *already* unreal? One simply does not exert oneself to get rid of something so flimsily justified, so precariously *grounded.*

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Each of us, each man unlucky enough not to believe in the eternal cycle of births and deaths, aspires to a superabundance of illusion and torment. We pine for the malediction of being reborn. Buddha took exorbitant pains to achieve what? *definitive* death—what we, on the contrary, are sure of obtaining without meditations and mortifications, without raising a finger." . . .

That's just about how this fallen man would express himself if he consented to lay bare the depths of his thought. Who will dare throw the first stone? Who has not spoken to himself in this way? We are so addicted to our own history that we would like to see it drone on and on, relentlessly. But whether one lives one or a thousand lives, whether one has at one's disposal a single hour or all of time, the problem remains the same: an insect and a god should not differ in their manner of viewing the fact of existence *as such,* which is so terrifying (as only miracles can be) that, reflecting on it, one understands the will to disappear forever so as not to have to consider it again in other existences. This is what Buddha emphasized, and it seems doubtful he would have altered his conclusion had he ceased to believe in the mechanism of transmigration.

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To discover that all things lack foundation and continue to exist is only an apparent inconsistency: carried to an extreme, perception of the void tallies with perception of the all, it amounts to *entrance* into the all. One begins at last to *see;* done with groping, one is reassured, bolstered. If there exists some chance of salvation outside faith, it must be sought in the faculty of *enriching* oneself on contact with unreality.

Even if the experiment of the void were a mere hoax, it would still be worth trying. What it proposes, what it attempts to do, is annihilate death and life with the single aim of making them tolerable. If it succeeds on occasion, what more can we ask? Without it, there is no remedy to the illness of being, no hope of recovering, if only for brief instants, the primeval bliss, the light of pure anteriority.

[*Translated by Frederick Brown*]

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